The Remarkable Rocket

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF OSCAR WILDE

Oscar Wilde was one of three children born in Dublin, Ireland, to aristocratic parents, both of whom were well-known intellectuals and artists. As a child, his mother wrote and read to him the poetry of a revolutionary group, the Young Irelanders, instilling him early on with a love of poetry and the written word. Wilde studied Classics at Trinity College Dublin before moving on to study at Oxford. During and after university, Wilde was a prominent advocate of aestheticism and dabbled in a number of literary pursuits as an essayist, lecturer, journalist, and author. He became a renowned public figure in London and abroad because of his sharp wit, eccentricity, and praise of the hedonistic pursuit of pleasure. During this time, he also married Constance Lloyd, the daughter of a wealthy lawyer with whom he had two children. In the 1890s, Wilde reached the height of his writing career, beginning with the publication of his sole novel, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. After its success, Wilde turned to writing plays, producing a number of comedies that made light of different aspects of society, as well as his most famous play, the wildly successful *The Importance of Being Earnest* in 1895. In that same year, Wilde's secret life as a homosexual was exposed by his lover's father, which in late Victorian England was a criminal act. Wilde was jailed for indecency and sentenced to two years of hard labor, which he served. Upon his release he immediately fled to Paris, where he wrote his final work, a long poem titled *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, a commemoration of his time in prison and reflection on the struggle of the prisoner. During his time in prison and after, Wilde expressed a deepening interest in Catholicism. In Wilde's last days, penniless and dying of meningitis, his friend and lover Robert Ross called a priest who baptized Wilde into the Catholic Church. Wilde died at the age of 46.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The invisible backdrop to much of Oscar Wilde's work, including "The Remarkable Rocket," is the rise of the English middle class, catalyzed by the Industrial Revolution. Ending the the wide divide between the aristocrats and the paupers that had existed for hundreds of years, the middle class enjoyed a level of comfort that was far closer to high society than the masses had ever been, yet retained much of the simple morality and common sense of working people. The world of the powerful and the world of the common were brought much closer together, and the contrast made the aristocracy seem more and more absurd and unnecessary. Wilde, though he was certainly a member of high society, made a living by holding a mirror up to the upper crust of society and mocking its pomp and circumstance, while at the same time offering quiet deference to the admirable simplicity of the middle class, such as in the way that the Duck is depicted as practical, kind, and even beautiful, content to care for her family and eschew public life.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Oscar Wilde's literary works fall in the Victorian period of literature, which marked the transition between the poetic period of Romanticism and the much more serious Edwardian literature that would dominate the twentieth century. Wilde's work shows the influence of both, mixing the playfully colorful language of Romantic poetry with the ironic comedy and social commentary that would become much more popular after Wilde's death. "The Remarkable Rocket" is of a similar tone to the other pieces of the same anthology, the most famous of which is "The Happy Prince," as well as other beloved children's books from the era, such as Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and Anna Sewell's *Black Beauty*. "The Remarkable Rocket" also plays on the same themes of high society and aristocracy as Wilde's enduring classic play, *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Wilde's plays strongly influenced Edwardian playwright George Bernard Shaw (*Pygmalion*), whose success was beginning as Wilde's was ending. This can be seen especially in Shaw's first major success, a comedy called *Arms and the Man*, which struck a similarly ironic, sneering tone towards conventions of society.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** "The Remarkable Rocket"
- **When Written:** 1888
- **Where Written:** London, England
- **When Published:** May 1888
- **Literary Period:** Victorian
- **Genre:** Short story, fairytale
- **Setting:** A kingdom in Europe
- **Climax:** The Rocket is finally set off, exploding anonymously in the countryside.
- **Point of View:** Third person

EXTRA CREDIT

Master of Epigrams. Oscar Wilde was and remains famous for his constant invention of epigrams (clever, oft satirical one-liners). "The Remarkable Rocket" contains several prime examples, such as, "The only thing that sustains one through life

is the consciousness of the immense inferiority of everybody else, and this is a feeling that I have always cultivated."

PLOT SUMMARY

In a European kingdom, a young Prince is about to be married to a young Princess, and the whole **Court** is brimming with anticipation. At the wedding, the King plays the flute, which he is terrible at, though he believes he is wonderful since none of his subjects ever have the courage to do anything but cheer when he plays. The Princess has never seen **fireworks**, so the King orders that a display of them be set off as the finale.

The fireworks, having been prepared and arranged by the Royal Pyrotechnist, begin having a conversation amongst themselves. All of the fireworks act haughtily, bickering amongst themselves over the size of the world and the death of romance. A tall, "supercilious-looking" Rocket coughs sharply, as he always does, to draw attention to himself before making his introduction. He speaks with great self-seriousness, expressing his belief that he is the most significant being in the world and reflecting on how lucky the Prince is that he should be married on the day that the Rocket is to be set off. Even though the other fireworks contradict him, insisting that certainly it is the fireworks who are being set off to honor the royal wedding and not the other way around, the Rocket is defiant. He boasts about his remarkable lineage, ponders how terribly interesting he is, and praises himself for his highly sensitive nature, which he believes makes him quite extraordinary. The rest of the fireworks listen, but do not take the Rocket seriously, though this fact eludes him. As the Rocket is monologuing about his great friendship for the Prince (despite the fact that he has never met him) and how great a tragedy it would be for the whole world if any harm ever befell the Rocket, he begins to cry. A pair of fireworks offer him the common sense warning that he should be careful not to wet himself since it will prevent his gunpowder from lighting, the Rocket angrily rejects their advice because, in his words, he is "utterly uncommon." The other fireworks keep bickering with the Rocket and his tears flow down, soaking himself.

At midnight, the Royal Pyrotechnist and his assistants arrive and put their torches to the fireworks, who each set off in turn. They soar into the air and explode brilliantly, delighting the Court and enjoying themselves thoroughly. However, the Rocket, whose tears have soaked his gunpowder, does not set off, and he is left there alone. The Rocket interprets this to mean that he is being reserved for some grander occasion. The wedding ends, and the Court leaves. The next day, the cleaners find the lone Rocket and promptly toss him over the wall into a neighboring ditch in **the countryside**. The Rocket presumes that he is being sent on retreat to recover his strength and his nerves.

As the Rocket is sitting in the mud, a Frog approaches him, talking incessantly. The Rocket coughs for attention, but the Frog merely remarks on how closely his cough sounds to a croak, which is the most beautiful sound in the world. The Frog tells the Rocket about his ultra-popular glee club, and about his beautiful daughters, never letting the Rocket get a word in. As the Frog makes to leave, the Rocket angrily points out that he was not given the chance to speak, but the Frog quips that he prefers it that way, since it prevents arguments. The Frog swims away, leaving the Rocket talking angrily after him, and reaffirming his belief that someday his greatness will be seen.

A Duck swims up to the Rocket and asks him if his odd shape is a birth defect or the result of some horrible accident. The Rocket belittles her as a simple middle-class commoner, and tries to intimidate her with his high-class nobility and ability to fly into the air and explode. The Duck, however, does not care, since she can see no function that could offer society. Furthermore, she is unimpressed by his claims of nobility and aspirations for public life, having tried politics herself once finding that it accomplished nothing. Rather, the Duck settled for domesticity and caring for her family, encouraging the Rocket to do the same. However, the Rocket clings to his aspiration to make a great public impression and enjoy the finer things in life. As the Duck swims away, the Rocket yells after her that he was not finished talking and still has so many things to say.

As the Rocket is pondering his own genius, two boys arrive carrying some firewood and a kettle. One of them notices the Rocket lying in the mud, mistaking him for an old stick. The boys build a small fire to boil water with the kettle, adding the Rocket to the fuel, and take a nap while they wait. The Rocket, soaked as he is, slowly dries until his gunpowder is dry enough to ignite. It does so, and while the boys are fast asleep, the Rocket soars up into the air, believing that his hour has come and he will make such an explosion in the afternoon air that it will be the talk of the country for a whole year. He explodes, but is seen by no one. The only living thing to notice him at all is a goose, which is startled by his smoldering stick falling to the ground. Nevertheless, the Rocket takes this as a sign that he has made a great sensation, and burns out.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

The Rocket – The titular Rocket is the protagonist of the story. The Rocket claims to be born of remarkable parents (though the story never confirms this), and thus believes himself to be the most remarkable thing in the world, considering himself to be the paragon of high society. Although he believes he is sympathetic and virtuous, in actuality he is haughty, arrogant, and condescending. The Rocket is certain that he is destined

for greatness, but he has not yet been set off and is anticipating his entrance into public life and the magnificent impression that he is sure he will create. Like the King, the Rocket is so obsessed with himself and assured of his grand significance to the world that he is completely delusional. For every personal failure he faces, every negative interaction, and every insult directed towards him, he reinterprets it to reaffirm his own self-image as an utterly remarkable individual. For example, when he fails to light because he has foolishly soaked his gunpowder with his own tears, he believes that rather than a failure, it must mean that he is being reserved for an even grander occasion than the finale for the royal wedding between the Prince and the Princess. The Rocket's character never develops or changes over the course of the story. Until the moment that he burns out, he remains convinced of his own greatness and is thus an insufferable and pitiable figure.

The King – The King is the ruler of the kingdom in which the story takes place and the father of the Prince who is getting married. Like the Rocket, the King is convinced of his own greatness and his self-absorption has made him similarly delusional. The King believes that he is a skilled musician and, although his entire **Court** knows otherwise, that delusion is reinforced since none of his Courtiers have the courage to tell him the truth. The King is also in the habit of answering questions that are not addressed to him, believing that anyone should be happy to receive his wisdom. Although the King and the Rocket never interact, the King serves to reinforce the same self-importance and self-obsession—and the delusion that follows—that possesses the Rocket, which the story is warning against.

The Frog – The Frog is one of the residents of **the countryside**, who meets the Rocket after he has been discarded over the wall and thrown in the swamp. The Frog, like the Rocket, is utterly self-absorbed, believing that a good conversation is one in which only he speaks and that any member of good society holds all of the same opinions as he does. The Frog's arrogance leads him to be similarly delusional, believing that he and his croaking glee club are wildly popular. Rather than understanding that they are an irritant who keeps everyone from sleeping due to the noise, they believe that everyone is staying awake to enjoy their beautiful music.

The Duck – The Duck is a resident of **the countryside** who meets the Rocket while he is stuck in the swamp. The Duck thinks very little of the Rocket's pompousness and self-aggrandizing claims, since she cannot see how he offers any utility to the rest of the world. Nevertheless, the Duck is of a kindly disposition, inviting the Rocket to take up residence in the country, which is the only hospitality ever offered in the story. The Duck did try her hand at public life and politics once, but quickly found that she was too pragmatic for it and opted to settle for caring for her family instead. Where the Rocket is the epitome of high-society arrogance, the Duck is the paragon of middle-class simplicity and goodness.

MINOR CHARACTERS

The Prince – The Prince is the son of the King. It is the Prince's royal wedding to the Princess at which the Rocket was supposed to be set off.

The Princess – The Princess has arrived from Russia, via Finland, to marry the Prince. It is due to the fact that she has never seen **fireworks** before that the King orders a fireworks display at the royal wedding.

The Page – The Page is a member of the royal **Court**, and twice makes witty comments that delight the other Courtiers as well as the King.

The Dragonfly – The Dragonfly briefly meets the Rocket in the swamp, suggesting that his penchant for hearing himself speak would lend itself well to a career as a philosopher.

The Roman Candle – One of the **fireworks** arranged for the royal wedding.

The Bengal Light – One of the **fireworks** arranged for the royal wedding.

The Catherine Wheel – One of the **fireworks** arranged for the royal wedding.

The Little Squib – One of the **fireworks** arranged for the royal wedding.

The Cracker – One of the **fireworks** arranged for the royal wedding.

The Fire-Balloon – One of the **fireworks** arranged for the royal wedding.

The Fire-Balloon – One of the **fireworks** arranged for the royal wedding.

The Royal Pyrotechnist – The keeper of the **fireworks**.

The Workmen – Cleaners of **the Court**.

The Two Boys – Residents of **the countryside**. They put the Rocket in their fire, mistaking him for an old stick.

The Goose – A resident of **the countryside**, whom the Rocket startles when he finally explodes in the sky.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

PRIDE, ARROGANCE, AND DELUSION

In "The Remarkable Rocket," Wilde warns against the effects of a wildly inflated ego. The eponymous Rocket, who has been set up to honor a royal wedding, believes himself to be the most important and admirable individual who has ever lived. Though he fails to perform as a firework should, the Rocket entertains a series of delusions that allow him to maintain his belief in his own grandeur. However, he is not alone in this. The other chief characters in the story—the King and the Frog—are similarly obsessed with their own sense of self-importance, which causes each of them to live in a delusional subjective reality. These arrogant delusions prevent the Rocket, the King, and the Frog from seeing reality the way that it truly is.

The King, the Rocket, and the Frog each consider themselves to be the most interesting and compelling people in the world. The King wrongly believes himself to be a talented flute player—though his Courtiers know otherwise and simply refuse to tell him so—and a wise counsel, constantly answering questions that were asked of other people in the assumption that anyone would like to be graced by his intellect. The Rocket believes that every event, including the marriage of the Prince and Princess, is dedicated to honoring himself and his own obvious grandeur. The Frog believes also in his own great musical prowess and that he need not listen to anyone else speak, since anyone who is of good society already would agree with him. The Rocket puts great emphasis on his genealogy, though nobody seems to care, and considers himself an intimate friend of the Prince despite the fact that he has never met him. Everything that the Rocket considers valuable about himself is based on his own testimony and is ultimately a farce.

The delusions held by the King, the Rocket, and the Frog cannot be objectively true. The King believes himself to be a great musician, though his Courtiers know otherwise. Both the Rocket and the Frog are of the (mutually exclusive) opinion that everyone ought to listen to them, as they are the only ones with anything of importance to say, which causes conflict when they meet since neither of them has any interest in listening to the other. The Rocket also operates on the assumption that everyone greatly admires him, when in fact, no one does. For the King, the Rocket, and the Frog, these delusions are necessary to maintain their own sense of self-importance. If they were to have any grasp of objective reality and set their delusions aside, they would be forced to realize that they are each largely insignificant.

Even though both the King and the Frog live in delusional, subjective realities, the people around them play along with their delusions or at least do not contradict them—as opposed to the Rocket, who is alone in his conviction—demonstrating how an entire group can be led to reinforce a delusion borne out of a single individual's arrogance. Though the narrator definitively states that the King is a dreadful musician, the people of **the Court** applaud every time that he plays. Due to his influence and his subjects' unwillingness to defy him, the King's delusion of being a talented musician is reciprocated and reinforced by the Courtiers' positive reinforcement, even though that is not how they truly see him. Likewise, the Frog, though he is not a powerful individual, lives in the shared delusion with the rest of his glee club that everyone finds croaking to be a beautiful sound and enjoys the frogs' all-night noise-making. The Frog and his cohort misinterpret the fact that they are annoyingly keeping the farmer's wife awake all night as proof of their immense popularity. With no one to contradict them, their delusion becomes shared within their group and mutually reinforced.

Beyond merely buying into the delusions of the King, the entire Court suffers its own sincerely held delusions borne out of their own ideals, suggesting that society at large can be similarly misled and lose their grasp of objectivity. The Rocket's grandeur and the King's musical prowess are both expressly denied by the narrator. Though the Rocket believes he is remarkable until his dying breath, the narrator interjects and states that he has died in obscurity. Likewise, though the King believes that he is talented and his subjects applaud, the narrator interjects and states that of course everyone knew he was dreadful, they were just playing along. Although the delusion is shared among the Court, the Courtiers are only play-acting and do not truly believe it. By contrast, the narrator does not interject when describing the magical crystal chalice shared by the Prince and Princess. The entire Court truly believes that the chalice is magical (remaining clear if true lovers drink from it, but clouding gray if used by people who were not in love) and the narrator lets this fact stand, even though the reader will immediately surmise that it is just a regular cup. In their idealization of a perfect fairytale marriage, the whole Court has formed their own delusion, just as they are similarly deluded when believing that the King's doubling of the Page's salary is anything more than a hollow gesture. This extrapolation of delusion from an individual to an entire society shows that everyone runs the risk of letting arrogance of prideful ideals about how the world should work delude them, distorting the world around them and preventing them from seeing reality for what it truly is.

Wilde, who was himself an opulent and self-important figure, seems to be mocking himself with the story's self-absorbed characters. The tenuous grasp of reality shown by the King, the Rocket, and the Frog demonstrates the way in which an inflated self-importance leads to a delusional outlook on the world. This is an obviously negative outcome, and one to be avoided. However, Wilde complicates the moral argument by pointing out that an entire society may be drawn into such delusions by their own prideful ideals.

HIGH SOCIETY AND SNOBBERY

"The Remarkable Rocket" takes place amidst characters of high society and roundly mocks them. From the royal wedding and the Courtiers to the bundle of **fireworks** and their pre-flight discussions, Wilde depicts the upper class and its ceremonies and posturing as hollow, offering neither function nor beauty to the world. Through his satire of society people, Wilde insists that their preoccupations and judgments are largely meaningless.

Wilde's depiction of high society is rife with posturing that is treated with great gravity but actually means nothing at all. During the royal wedding, a clever young Page twice makes comments that delight the audience and become the talk of **the Court**. In response, the King twice declares that the Page's salary be doubled, causing even more delight—despite the fact that the Page makes no money at all. A doubled salary of zero is still zero, and the King has not actually bestowed any real reward. Despite this, the whole Court is pleased. Likewise, when the King plays the flute terribly, the Court feigns delight, cheering him on as if he were an expert musician. Through these instances, the story suggests that *all* of the Courtier's expressed happiness during the wedding is similarly hollow.

While the fireworks are waiting to be lit, they too are constantly trying to prove their own sophistication and status in a microcosm of what is taking place at Court. Fireworks yell "Order, Order!" or "Bahumbug" to prove their expertise in the law or their pragmatism. Similarly, a briefly humiliated firework tries to prove his own importance by bullying some of the smaller fireworks. The sheer ridiculousness of fireworks adopting courtly customs underscores how silly such customs are in the first place. Even the Duck, the most practical character in the story, took a stab at public life and politics until she realized that for all of her condemnations and calls for reform, nothing actually happened. While this demonstrates the simple pragmatism of the Duck, it is also seems to be a sharp jab at the impotence and inefficiency of politics in Victorian England. While all of the ceremony and posturing of high society is treated with great gravity, it has no actual value beyond inflating the egos of those involved.

The story highlights how high society offers no function or value to the rest of the world in the way that the "provincials" or middle class do. The King and the Courtiers are never described as fulfilling any role or function, while the fireworks briefly flash into the air and die providing only a moment's worth of diversion. Neither the Court nor the fireworks, both of which represent the upper crust, accomplish or meaningfully contribute anything to society. The Duck, whom the Rocket meets while he is sinking into the mud, is unimpressed by the fact that the Rocket can soar into the sky and explode, since she sees no function in it and no way that the Rocket can contribute to society. If he were gone, no one would be bereft. The only time that the Rocket offers value to someone is when he is mistaken as an odd-looking stick by two boys who promptly use him as kindling to boil water. Only by being ripped away from high society and repurposed is the Rocket ever afforded the opportunity to contribute in the smallest way to society, and even then, he is so delusional that he does not realize or appreciate it. The Duck's trading of public life for domesticity is a clear value statement on Wilde's part. The duck is both the kindest character and the most productive, providing for her family. Such kindness and simplicity could not co-exist with the masquerading and scheming required for public life and politics. Contrarily, the Rocket considers work to be the pastime of people with nothing to do, and believes that his service to the world is merely in presenting himself to the public; he is thus the most insufferable and useless character in the story.

More than offering no clear function or value to the world, high society often actively disrupts it with its penchant for vacuous, self-absorbed behavior. In the story, the Rocket and his haughty demeanor, though more or less suited to high society and certainly derived from it, are a disruptive nuisance to the residents of **the countryside**. Every character that he interacts with finds a reason to quickly leave, even though the Rocket insists on shouting at them after they have left. Even the Dragonfly, who had been peacefully sitting on a stalk of grass, is driven away by the Rocket's arrogance. The Rocket is a nuisance to everyone he meets. The Frog and his glee club, though not necessarily a part of the Court or High Society itself, certainly echo its sentiments of self-absorption and delusion. Though the Frog believes that everyone loves their all-night croaking, it is in fact a dreadful nuisance, disrupting the farmer's wife's sleep.

Wilde uses this story to unabashedly mock the upper crust for its lack of contributed value to the rest of society. Rather than calling for the abolition of the wealthy or powerful, Wilde settles for highlighting the absurdity of all their pomp and circumstance. Once again, Wilde seems to be making fun of himself as well, since he ran in such wealthy and sophisticated circles, often being invited to dinners and events as a token celebrity.

FAME AND ALIENATION

The Rocket's sole goal in life is to be famous—that is, widely admired and the talk of the town. Not only does the Rocket desire this, he believes he *deserves* it, that it is his birthright due to his obvious grandeur and impressive lineage. In the Rocket's eyes, such success and fame is his inevitable end. Unfortunately, the Rocket's ego and surety of his own destiny become his downfall, exiling him to **the countryside** to die in obscurity. Through the arc of the Rocket, Wilde argues that, ironically, loneliness and isolation are the consequence of a vain pursuit of fame.

In the Rocket's conviction that he is unique and remarkable,

thus meriting fame, he either knowingly or unknowingly pushes away from the people around him. The Rocket naturally assumes that everyone he meets is beneath him, spurning the help of others. The other **fireworks**, with whom the Rocket would have much in common if he could manage to set aside his belief that he is utterly remarkable, offer keen advice. For example, they tell him not to cry so much and dampen his gunpowder, which indeed is what prevents his going off. Had he listened, he could have soared into the air with the others and at least be briefly seen and enjoyed by **the Court**. Instead, soaked from his own tears, the Rocket is tossed into the swamp. There, the Duck shows hospitality to the Rocket, despite how insufferable he is, saying that she hopes he will take up residence in the country. She values him not for his function or for his greatness, for she sees that he has none of either, but rather just on account of his personhood. The Duck, who is the only character to have left public life, seems to be the most well-adjusted, able to see value in in the most supercilious character. However, the Rocket rejects her offer of hospitality and community and further alienates himself. The Rocket is obsessed with fame and being known by all, since he believes that he deserves it. Had he been willing to set aside his demand for renown, he could have at least been known and appreciated by the other fireworks or by the Duck and her countryside community. Instead, he finds himself in a self-imposed exile, more alienated and unknown than he would have been if he had been able to set aside his obsession with fame and recognition.

Though the desire of fame is to be celebrated and widely admired, the Rocket's self-imposed exile results in the exact opposite effect. The Rocket is mistaken for an old stick by two young boys and used as kindling to boil their water while they take a nap. When the flame dries the Rocket's gunpowder enough that he finally goes off, he believes that he will create such an explosion that it will become local legend. However, the narrator again interjects to state definitively that no one saw nor heard the Rocket's ascent. The Rocket dies believing that he has caused a great sensation, when in reality he has died in obscurity, unknown and uncelebrated. The only effect that the Rocket has is briefly frightening a Goose as his expired stick falls to the ground. Though he believes in his own greatness, he dies seconds after, leaving no legacy, no awe, no trace, and no one to remember him. In his quest to be widely known, he becomes permanently and irrevocably alienated from the world.

Wilde, who famously said, "There is only one thing worse than being talked about, and that is not being talked about," warns that the pursuit of fame, the desire to overcome loneliness and to be widely seen and known, is just as likely to result in abject alienation. Rather than solving the problem, single-mindedly pursuing fame simply exacerbates it. Though the Rocket is given several chances to belong and to be known, he is unwilling to settle for anything less than absolute greatness and celebrity status. Wilde suggests that as the Rocket dies with nothing, in obscurity, so will anyone who pursues fame at all costs.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THE COURT

The Court, as the setting of the royal wedding and the home of the Rocket, is a representation of the hollowness of high society and the aristocracy of late Victorian England, with which Oscar Wilde was well-acquainted. The Court and high society are preoccupied with status, consumed with conceit, and do not add any sort of value to the world. Although the members of the Court take the words of the King quite seriously, the story implies that there is no substance to his proclamations, such as when the King declares a doubled salary for the Page, who actually receives no salary at all. Even though the King's declaration has no substance and accomplishes nothing, the Courtiers are thrilled. In the same way, when the King does a horrible job of playing the flute, the Courtiers cry out, "Charming, charming!" since they dare not defy the King and they all seek his favor. The Court is not only depicted as being hollow, but also relatively functionless. There is never any reference to the Court or the King accomplishing a single thing or administrating as a government. All of their energy and activity is put into pomp and circumstance—like the lavish royal wedding between the Prince and the Princess, which serves as the story's backdrop—but it adds no real value to the world of the story.

THE COUNTRYSIDE

The countryside represents the middle class, the suburban, and the common. It is the symbolic opposite of **the Court**, lacking gratuitous luxury, fame, or the admiration of others. The residents of the country are simple people who offer simple but tangible value to the world. Although the people of the Court look down upon the people of the countryside, the people of the countryside do not seem bothered by it. The simple, positive portrayal of the countryside reflects Wilde's own fondness for the simple, moral middle class, even though he himself was not a part of it. In the story, the Duck is the quintessential resident of the countryside, being kind, honest, and pragmatic. She does not care for the Rocket's boast of status or genealogy, for she does not see any practical function that he can offer to society. Rather than pursue the prestige of public life, the Duck has herself decided to settle for domesticity, caring for her family, and invites the

Rocket to do the same.

The Frog offers a nuance to the countryside's representation of the middle class, in that he possesses the same pride and delusion that characterizes high society (and, by extension, the Rocket himself). Although the Frog does not carry the same pretense of remarkable genealogy or social status as the Courtiers and the Rocket do, he is nevertheless convinced that his croaking is the most beautiful sound in the world to everyone who hears it. The Frog demonstrates that merely belonging to the middle class does not preclude one from prideful delusion, though it does make it significantly less likely.

FIREWORKS

The nature of fireworks is a symbolic nod to the nature of fame, especially fame sought through being a celebrity. Fireworks are short-lived entities; they are unimpressive before they are lit, and though dazzling while in action, they go up, explode, and are gone within a matter of seconds. They are a fleeting means of entertainment that does not leave any lasting contribution. This is reflective of public life in high society and the pursuit of status and fame; an individual may invest their entire life into the pursuit of fame, but even if they're successful in gaining recognition, it is over within moments and they are spent, left with nothing. The Rocket, in his obsession with making a great impression, never seems to grasp that the price of being set off, making his grand entrance into high society, is to be spent and no longer exist.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Dover Thrift Editions edition of *The Happy Prince and Other Fairy Tales* published in 2012.

The Remarkable Rocket Quotes

"She was like a white rose before," said a young Page to his neighbour, "but she is like a red rose now;" and the whole Court was delighted.

For the next three days everybody went about saying, "White rose, Red rose, Red rose, White rose;" and the King gave orders that the Page's salary was to be doubled. As he received no salary at all this was not of much use to him, but it was considered a great honour, and was duly published in the Court Gazette.

Related Characters: The Page (speaker), The King

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 6

Explanation and Analysis

The Page makes this quip as the Princess blushes after the Prince tells her she is beautiful during their first meeting. The King's empty declaration and the Court's ensuing delight is the first instance that suggests that the King and the Court are quite frivolous, setting the tone for the continued depiction of the Court and even the fireworks throughout the rest of the story. The King's hollow gesture is a strong parallel to the hollowness of high society. Courtiers put great effort into their public image and posturing, making great shows of sincerity and gravity despite the fact that they do not actually do anything of value or perform any function for society.

As soon as there was perfect silence, the Rocket coughed a third time and began. He spoke with a very slow, distinct voice, as if he was dictating his memoirs, and always looked over the shoulder of the person to whom he was talking. In fact, he had a most distinguished manner.

Related Characters: The Rocket

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 9

Explanation and Analysis

The fireworks have been conversing and mostly bickering amongst themselves, each trying to prove themselves more sophisticated and cultured than their peers. The Rocket introduces himself, as he always does, by faking a cough to draw people's attention to him.

The Rocket's use of a memoir-dictation voice is particularly ironic. Memoirs tend to be written by people who have lived full lives, accomplished great things, or learned something important. The Rocket has done none of the three. Since he has only one use, to fly up into the air and explode—marking his entrance into public life—there is nothing he has accomplished or experienced yet worthy of putting into a memoir, and he has certainly never learned anything. The Rocket positions himself as a deep well of wisdom, but in reality is extraordinarily shallow.

[…] and the Bengal Light felt so crushed that he began at once to bully the little squibs, in order to show that he was still a person of some importance.

Related Characters: The Rocket, The Bengal Light

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 10

Explanation and Analysis

The Rocket, speaking about his "remarkable parents," has misspoken, saying "pylotechnic" rather than "pyrotechnic." When the Bengal Light corrects the Rocket, with evidence that he (the Bengal Light) is right, the Rocket angrily defies him.

The Bengal Light's need to bully the other fireworks to prove his own importance and make himself feel better highlights the central role that hierarchy plays in high society, especially in Victorian England's aristocracy. One of the most important facets of one's public image within high society is their level of authority, their position within the power structure. Once again, high society is depicted by its emphasis on status and posturing, showing it to have little value and no sense of decency, especially compared with the countryside.

"I am laughing because I am happy," replied the Cracker. "That is a very selfish reason," said the Rocket angrily. "What right have you to be happy? You should be thinking about others. In fact, you should be thinking about me. I am always thinking about myself, and I expect everybody else to do the same. That is what is called sympathy. It is a beautiful virtue, and I possess it in a high degree."

Related Characters: The Rocket, The Cracker (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 10

Explanation and Analysis

When the Roman Candle and the Cracker share a private joke at the Rocket's expense, the Rocket demands to know what the Cracker is laughing about. The Cracker lies.

Poignantly, the Rocket does not question the Cracker's truthfulness, but instead is irate that the Cracker is happy at all while the Rocket is not. This action denotes a far more intense cynicism and narcissism than if the Rocket had merely gotten angry at the Cracker for making fun of him. This intense narcissism is only amplified by the Rocket's understanding of sympathy as a virtue, being that it means that everyone ought to be considering and sharing the feelings of the Rocket and only the Rocket at all times.

"The only thing that sustains one through life is the consciousness of the immense inferiority of everybody else, and this is a feeling that I have always cultivated."

Related Characters: The Rocket (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 11

Explanation and Analysis

The Rocket exclaims this as he is pitying himself for being told not to cry by the other fireworks, since they know that his gunpowder will not be able to ignite if it is wetted by his tears. Rather than heed their advice, the Rocket childishly resents it.

Once again, the Rocket's egotism has led him to live in under delusion with no grasp of reality. The word "cultivated" is quite astute, since such an outlandish belief cannot be the result of mere observation but has to be fostered, repeated, and tended. This is an excellent example of the sharply cutting, witty epigrams that Oscar Wilde was famous for.

[The Rocket] actually burst into real tears, which flowed down his stick like raindrops, and nearly drowned two little beetles, who were just thinking of setting up house together, and were looking for a nice dry spot to live in.

Related Characters: The Rocket

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 12

Explanation and Analysis

The Rocket has rejected the advice to keep himself dry numerous times now, and finally puts his proverbial foot down, declaring that if he desire to cry, then he will. And he does.

Wilde uses a very brief, absurdly abrupt interlude about two beetles who are considering "setting up house together" to contrast against the behavior of the Rocket. The Beetles are simple, humble, and together. They are living in a relationship and seeking only for a dry place to make a quiet little home. The Rocket, by contrast, is boastful, pompous, and seems hell-bent on pushing everyone else away from him with his insufferable demeanor and superiority complex. His seeks a life as the center of attention, rather than settling for a quite one, and resultantly winds up far more alone and unknown than the beetles.

"Every one was a great success except the Remarkable Rocket. He was so damp with crying that he could not go off at all. The best thing in him was the gunpowder, and that was so wet with tears that it was of no use. All his poor relations, to whom he would never speak, except with a sneer, shot up into the sky like wonderful golden flowers with blossoms of fire.

Related Characters: The Rocket

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 13

Explanation and Analysis

The Rocket, having ignored the wise advice not to cry, has soaked himself and failed to ignite. He is left watching all of the other fireworks perform their function in celebration of the royal wedding.

The Rocket, who so brazenly and obnoxiously declared himself to be the finest thing to ever live, certainly the greatest firework, has failed in his singular task. This is the first instance in the story where reality directly contradicts the Rocket's beliefs about himself. Any sane person would take that as a hint that their fundamental ideas need to be re-evaluated, but the Rocket, so deluded by his arrogance and notions of grandeur, refuses to be honest with himself and presses further into delusion. His pride and self-pity have quite literally grounded him.

"Bad Rocket? Bad Rocket?" he said as he whirled through the air; "impossible! Grand Rocket, that is what the man said. Bad and Grand sound very much the same, indeed they often are the same."

Related Characters: The Rocket (speaker), The Workmen

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 13

Explanation and Analysis

After the Rocket fails to perform, he is left alone in the Court among all the other debris and paraphernalia of the wedding. The next morning when the workmen arrive to clean up, they spot the Rocket and promptly discard him over the wall.

This is the moment of the Rocket's exile from the Court to the countryside, and like every other moment in the Rocket's life, it occurs with no pomp or fanfare and the Rocket completely misunderstands what is occurring. The Rocket's reinterpretation of "bad rocket" into "grand rocket" suggests that on top of simply being a fool, the Rocket is actively dishonest with himself, shielding his ego from the reality that he is not remarkable and does not matter in the grand scheme of everyone else's lives.

"[...] I like to do all the talking myself. It saves time, and prevents arguments [...] Arguments are extremely vulgar, for everybody in good society holds exactly the same opinions."

Related Characters: The Frog (speaker), The Rocket

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 14-15

Explanation and Analysis

The Frog offers this answer to the Rocket when the Rocket protests that their time together hadn't amounted to any sort of conversation, since the Frog was the only one who spoke.

The Frog, a resident of the countryside, mirrors aspects of both the Rocket and the Court. Like the Rocket, the Frog believes he is a most captivating figure and is the only

person worth listening to; he loves to hear himself speak. Like the Court, the Frog also believes that anyone of "good society" should all hold the same opinions—namely, *his* opinions. The same posturing, idealism, and lack of self-awareness native to the Court can also be found in the countryside, it seems.

Although the Frog and his delusional arrogance seems to be an outlier amidst the countryside—all of the other characters outside of the Court behave simply and humbly—his character adds nuance to the otherwise simple characterization of high society as delusional and vacuous, and the middle class as uniformly practical and good.

"I like hearing myself talk. It is one of my greatest pleasures. I often have long conversations all by myself, and I am so clever that sometimes I don't understand a single word of what I am saying."

"Then you should certainly lecture on Philosophy," said the Dragon-fly.

Related Characters: The Dragonfly, The Rocket (speaker), The Frog

Related Themes:

Page Number: 15

Explanation and Analysis

After the Frog has left, the Rocket continues talking after him until he is simply talking to himself. When the Dragonfly, sitting on a nearby stalk of grass, advises him that this is a fruitless endeavor, the Rocket offers this response.

This is another excellent example of Wilde's penchant for witty epigrams, as well as another self-aware jab at the upper class. Wilde, through the Dragonfly, mocks the apparent frivolity and willful vagueness of intellectuals and philosophers, unique to the upper class. Luxury and a surplus of free time are necessary to engage in such pursuits, which Wilde skewers here as often being entirely meaningless.

Wilde himself was a noted advocate of the philosophy of aestheticism—the pursuit of beauty and pleasure rather than more profound purpose—and was also a talented essayist and interpreter of Classical literature; he was both a philosopher and intellectual. As with his mockery of high society snobbery and self-absorption, his mockery of philosophy seems acutely directed at himself.

"I don't think much of that," said the Duck, "as I cannot see what use it is to any one. Now, if you could plough the fields like the ox, or draw a cart like the horse, or look after the sheep like the collie-dog, that would be something."

Related Characters: The Duck (speaker), The Rocket

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 16

Explanation and Analysis

The Rocket has tried to impress the Duck with stated ability to fly up into the air and explode in a bloom of sparks—for who, he reasons, would not be impressed by that? Yet the Duck is, in fact, unimpressed.

The Duck is the finest representation of the middle class countryside in this story, reflective of Wilde's own admiration for middle class simplicity and kindness. She also presents the starkest contrast to the Rocket, particularly in her belief that each person ought to offer something practical to society as a basic good or service. While the Rocket is of the belief that people of his caliber do not need to contribute anything to be valuable other than their very presence, the Duck's pragmatism offers a firm rebuttal.

"I had thoughts of entering public life once myself," answered the Duck; "there are so many things that need reforming. Indeed, I took the chair at a meeting some time ago, and we passed resolutions condemning everything that we did not like. However, they did not seem to have much effect. Now I go in for domesticity and look after my family."

Related Characters: The Duck (speaker), The Rocket

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 16-17

Explanation and Analysis

The Rocket has expressed his desire to return to Court and the fineries of high society. In response, the Duck recounts her own brief experience in politics.

It is telling that the Duck—who is the kindest, most practical, most hospitable, and most well-balanced character in the

story—could not stand to remain in politics or keep up the airs required for public life. In her goodness, she could not abide the posturing and conceit or the wasting of so much time on an occupation that produced no actual function. This is a clear statement on both the morality and efficacy of Late-Victorian politics as Wilde saw them.

More than just a criticism, the Duck is the embodiment of the countryside. She represents the decency and simplicity of domestic life, caring for one's family, and benefiting one's community. In this story and in his other works, Wilde often expressed a fondness for the middle class and their simplicity, even while he himself was mired in the trappings of high society.

"Now I am going to explode," he cried. "I shall set the whole world on fire, and make such a noise, that nobody will talk about anything else for a whole year." And he certainly did explode. Bang! Bang! Bang! went the gunpowder. There was no doubt about it.

But nobody heard him, not even the two little boys, for they were sound asleep.

Related Characters: The Rocket (speaker), The Two Boys

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 18

Explanation and Analysis

The boys, having mistaken the Rocket for an oddly-shaped stick, have tossed him into their cooking fire and fallen asleep. The Rocket, still damp, takes a while to dry by the flame until he finally lights, soaring into air.

The Rocket's quest for fame and recognition has brought him to this: exploding alone, unseen and unheard above a swamp. Rather than going off in front of the courtiers and the royal wedding, to be admired and appreciated even, if only for a moment—the Rocket certainly never would have experienced the legendary fame that he supposed he would—the Rocket dies in exile, alienated from high society. Wilde, through the Rocket's tragedy, posits this alienation as the true cost of the vain pursuit of fame and recognition. In his own self-obsession, the Rocket has driven away anyone close to him and exiled himself from society. Even so, the Rocket maintains his delusions of grandeur until his final breath, cementing himself as a tragically absurd figure.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

THE REMARKABLE ROCKET

The King's son, the Prince, is about to marry a Russian Princess from Finland, and **the Court** is already beginning to celebrate. The Princess is wearing a little silver cap and her skin is as pale as snow, so the people of the Court proclaim, "She is like a white rose!" When she and the Prince meet, they are immediately smitten with each other. When he tells her that she is beautiful, her skin blushes red.

Wilde writes this story as a fairytale and includes the typical fairytale convention of love at first sight. However, in light of the Court and the frivolity of high society, Wilde is pitching the perfect romance in a cynical light, as if it is just another aspect of delusion.

A clever young Page says, "She was like a white rose before, but she is like a red rose now," which delights **the Court** and the King. The King orders for the Page's salary to be doubled, which, since the Page receives no salary, means nothing at all. But the Court celebrates nonetheless and publishes the news in the local paper.

The King and the Court, representative of high society, are constantly posturing. The King makes a grand (but ultimately hollow) gesture of generosity and the Court, protecting its own image and seeking the favor of the King, plays along.

A few days later, as the wedding celebration continues, the Prince and Princess drink from a supposedly magical crystal chalice whose crystal will cloud grey if anyone other than true lovers drink from it. The Page makes another clever quip—noting that it is "as clear as crystal" that the couple are truly in love. **The Court** is again delighted, and the King futilely doubles the Page's salary once more.

The magical chalice is clearly just a regular cup. However, the whole Court buys into this delusion, demonstrating its idealization of true love and romance. Wilde seems to be skewering such idealization, which rose to great heights in the wealth of Romantic literature that preceded his Victorian era.

There is to be be a royal ball where the King has promised to play the flute for his subjects. The author interjects to say that the King is a horrible flute player, knowing "only two airs," but is unaware of this since none of his subjects are bold enough to tell him so and always applauded enthusiastically when the King plays.

While the belief in the chalice seems to have been held sincerely by **the Court** *as a manifestation of its own ideals, the musical prowess of the King is a clear farce. This is the most egregious instance of the Court's posturing, flatly lying to gain favor and maintain status.*

Since the Princess has never seen **fireworks** before, the King orders that a fireworks display be prepared as the last feature of the wedding festivities. After the royal Pyrotechnist finishes arranging and preparing them to be lit, "the fireworks began to talk to each other."

Wilde's abrupt transition from standard fairy tale fare to speaking objects strikes the first note of comic absurdity in the story. Wilde's use of absurd humor predates but strongly parallels 20th century authors such as Kurt Vonnegut and Douglas Adams. Within the tale itself, this comic absurdity will later be carried by the self-aggrandizing musings of both the Rocket and the Frog.

A small Squib, admiring the garden that they have been set up in, congratulates himself on having traveled the world, but is rudely corrected by a Roman Candle, who insists that the world is bigger than the King's garden, and in fact would take three whole days to visit thoroughly. At the same time, a Catherine Wheel, who prides herself on being heartbroken and melancholy, bemoans the death of love at the hands of the poets. She and the Roman Candle bicker about this.

The snobbery and delusion of the aristocratic Court is immediately present in the conversation between the fireworks as well. The Roman Candle is quick to judge, hoping to appear wise but looking like an even greater fool to the reader. The Catherine Wheel tries to prove her sophistication through cynicism, but mostly comes off as irritating and pathetic.

The Rocket introduces himself by coughing sharply, as he always did to "attract attention" before he spoke. A Cracker cries "Order, order!" to show that he had been involved in parliament. The Rocket speaks in a slow, distinguished tone, as if "dictating his memoirs," and never makes eye contact with the person he is talking to, but stares over their shoulder.

The Rocket speaking as if "dictating a memoir" is particularly ironic. Memoirs are meant to be written by individuals who have lived full lives and learned from their experiences. The Rocket has had no life—indeed, has not even entered society—but still considers himself a great source of wisdom and virtue.

The Rocket reflects on how "fortunate" it is for the Prince that he is to be married on the same day that the Rocket is to be set off, regarding it as a great honor for the Prince that their days should so coincide. The Squib contradicts him, arguing that all of the **fireworks** are to be set off in honor of the Prince and not the other way around.

Though all of the fireworks and the entire Court are delusional, the Rocket's delusion reaches far greater heights. It requires an astronomical ego to literally believe the world is centered around himself when everyone else clearly sees that it is not.

The Rocket defies him, explaining that while the rest of the **fireworks** may have been set up in honor of the royal wedding, the royal wedding is most certainly in honor of the Rocket's own splendor. This is due to the fact that the Rocket is born of "remarkable parents," who according to him, were most impressive and widely talked about after they were let off.

The Rocket's delusion is largely justified by his belief that his parents were noble rather than on any actual accomplishments, which is a clear reference to the Late-Victorian aristocracy of England. It even holds true for much of modern high society.

As he explains his lineage, the Rocket misspeaks, saying "pylotechnic" rather than "pyrotechnic." A Bengal Light corrects him, saying that he has the word written on his own canister and so is sure of its spelling. The Rocket reprimands him, claiming that he meant to say it that way. The Bengal Light is so embarrassed that he begins bullying the smaller **fireworks** to prove that he is still someone of status.

The Bengal Light's response to the Rocket's reprimand is poignant, nodding to the primary role that hierarchy and status play in high society. For the Bengal Light, proving that he is more powerful than someone else in the room reassures himself of his own value; without someone to dominate, his sense of self is at risk.

The Rocket returns to talking about himself, something he regards as a terribly fascinating subject. He points out his own sensitivity, claiming that it is one of the qualities that makes him so remarkable. When the Roman Candle and the Cracker share a private joke at the Rocket's expense, the Cracker laughs.

The Rocket's entire world and sense of reality is forcefully reshaped to maintain his own ego. Any quality he observes about himself must therefore be a chief virtue, since it was felt by a "remarkable" individual.

The Rocket demands to know why the Cracker is laughing, to which the Cracker answers that he is laughing merely because he is happy. The Rocket finds this to be a "selfish reason," since he himself is not happy and everyone else should be thinking as much about him as he does. The Rocket believes that the act of thinking about the Rocket is the definition of sympathy, a virtue that he possesses in the "high[est] degree."

Once again, the Rocket demonstrates extreme narcissism and is belligerent when the crowd does not echo his own sentiments. Again, he forcefully distorts reality, believing that sympathy, a universal virtue, is something that ought to be directed towards him alone, in all the world.

The Rocket reflects on the great tragedy it would be for everyone else if anything should happen to him. The Prince and Princess, he believes, would never know happiness again and the King would certainly never recover. As he considers his own supposed "importance," the Rocket nearly cries.

The Rocket's narcissism demonstrates his delusion but also his tremendous nearsightedness. It would be very difficult to believe that the universe revolved around him, as he does, if he had any inkling whatsoever of the size or scope of the world. His world is small, and thus he is able to be the center of it.

The Roman Candle and the Bengal Light advise the Rocket that he must keep himself dry of he is ever to set off correctly and delight others. They both see this as common sense. However, the Rocket spurns their common sense on the grounds that he is "very uncommon, and very remarkable," with a great imagination that "never think[s] of things as they really are."

Even the fireworks, snobbish and posturing as they are, understand on some level that their purpose is to give others pleasure. The Rocket completely misses this, showing that he cannot even fulfill a minor function. Wilde uses clever wordplay (denying "common sense" by claiming to be "uncommon") to voice a remarkably stupid character.

The Rocket ignores the need to keep himself dry, complaining instead that no one can appreciate his highly emotional nature and great sensitivity. He is angry at the other **fireworks** for laughing and enjoying themselves "just as if the Prince and Princess had not just been married."

Once again, the Rocket's self-obsession blinds him to the practical nature of his only function: to be lit and shoot into the air. Instead of making sure that he can operate properly, he wallows in self-pity.

When a little Fire-balloon suggests that the royal wedding is indeed a reason to be happy, the Rocket insists that that is a "trivial view of life." Instead, he muses on the fact that doom could fall on the Prince and Princess, such as a series of unlikely events that would result in their future child drowning in a river. Though this has not happened, the Rocket grieves the possibility that it could, and states that if it ever does happen, it will not be worth grieving about any longer.

At this point, the Rocket becomes utterly nonsensical, rambling about a far-fetched hypothetical tragedy. However, his delusion has forced him that point, since he has to justify to himself why he is unhappy on a happy day and how that is actually a mark of virtue.

The Bengal Light snidely calls the Rocket "the most affected person [he's] ever met." The Rocket responds that the Bengal Light is "the rudest person" and unable to comprehend the Rocket's friendship with the Prince, despite the fact that the Rocket does not know him. Rather, he insists that if he ever were to meet the Prince, they would no longer be friends.

The Rocket decides that he must have friends, since famous people do, but does not have any grasp of what that means. And since he cannot relate to anyone, friendship to him must not be based upon relationships either, for then it would be out of his reach.

The Rocket is again advised to keep himself dry, but indignantly declares that he will cry if he so chooses. He does so, tears streaming down his body and almost drowning a pair of beetles.

Wilde once again utilizes an abrupt introduction of absurd humor. The beetles are an inverse of the Rocket—simple, humble, together—and are nearly snuffed out by his self-pity.

Meanwhile, The Roman Candle and the Bengal Light keep shouting "Humbug!" as loudly as they can to demonstrate their disagreement and their own high level of practicality.

Not to be outdone, the Roman Candle and the Bengal Light continue to shape their public image. In high society, reputation is everything.

The moon rises, music plays, and the Prince and Princess lead the dance, as "white lilies" and "red poppies" watch on. The night progresses until, at midnight, the King orders the **fireworks** show to begin.

The white and red flowers seem to be a reference to the Page's initial quip, and Wilde continues his habit of personifying anything and everything. If the fireworks are alive, so must be the flowers.

The Royal Pyrotechnist and his crew light the **fireworks**, which set off in an excellent display. Each of the fireworks fly into the air and explode, enjoying themselves and delighting **the Court**.

The other fireworks, though vain and posturing, at least understand and fulfill their very minor function in society: to bring pleasure to others.

"[T]he Remarkable Rocket," however, has so wet himself with tears that his gunpowder is too damp to ignite. Meanwhile, all of the other **fireworks** are having a wonderful time soaring through the air. The little Princess is also having a wonderful time watching the spectacle.

The Rocket has failed his sole function, which is to soar into the air and delight his audience. He is also missing out on the enjoyment being shared by the Princess and the other fireworks. Not only is he an abject failure, he is also unable to share the delight of the celebration.

The Rocket believes that he was purposely not set off, and surmises that he is being reserved for an even more special occasion, which causes him to regard himself even more highly.

Since the Rocket's ego cannot abide the concept of personal failure, he once again deludes himself and distorts reality to pay himself even higher praise.

When the workmen come to clean **the Court** the next day, the Rocket sees them coming and believes they are about to honor him, so he puts his nose in the air and pretends to be thinking very serious thoughts. The workmen initially don't notice him, but when they do, they refer to him as a "bad rocket" and toss him over the palace wall into a ditch.

While it may have been plausible until now that the Rocket was at least impressive as a firework, the indifference with which he is treated by the workmen settles the matter. He is just a toy, and a faulty one at that.

The Rocket heard the workmen call him a "bad rocket," but surmises that they must have actually said "grand rocket," as the two words sound similar. He does not like the swamp he has landed in, but assumes it must be a "fashionable watering-place" he has been sent to rest and recover his nerves.

Once again, the Rocket's ego cannot hold up in the face of criticism and rejection, so he distorts reality again to create a picture that is more favorable to him. In his mind, he is not being exiled; he is being cared for.

A Frog swims up to the Rocket, noting that he is new to the area and then immediately discussing the weather (he likes grey clouds and rain; sun is bad weather) and how wonderful he thinks the swamp is.

The Frog's assessment of weather is another nod to subjectivity and delusion. While most people would prefer a sunny day, the Frog wants only wet weather.

The Rocket coughs for attention, as he often does, but the Frog merely remarks on how lovely his cough sounds and how closely it resembles a croak, which the Frog considers the most beautiful sound in the world. This reminds him of his glee club which croaks together near the farmer's house and keeps everyone awake all night, including the farmer's wife. The frog understands this to be a mark of their immense popularity, that everyone should lie awake to listen to the beauty of their croaking.

The Frog shows the same level of delusion and vanity—since everyone obviously loathes the croaking at night—that is typical to high society, even though he lives a far simpler life in the swamp. This adds nuance to Wilde's spearing of the upper class, suggesting that such delusions of grandeur are not relegated solely to the wealthy and sophisticated.

The Rocket, annoyed that he cannot get a word in edgewise, coughs angrily again. But the Frog simply remarks on his beautiful voice and continues talking again, this time about his daughters whom he fears will be eaten by a pike. Shortly thereafter, the Frog bids the Rocket farewell, saying that he has "enjoyed [their] conversation."

The Frog and his vanity are more than a match for the Rocket. The Frog possesses the same egotistical penchant for hearing himself speak, but lacks the Rocket's sensitivity, meaning that he easily gives the Rocket a taste of his own medicine by dominating the conversation.

The Rocket finally manages to get a word in, retorting that it was not a conversation since the Frog was the only one to speak the entire time. The Frog, however, prefers it that way, since "[i]t saves time, and prevents arguments," and, since everyone in "good society" should already hold the same opinion, there is no reason for arguments anyway.

The Frog holds the same prejudices as members of high society, but with a countryside flavoring. Rather than posturing to present a certain self-image, the Frog believes that everyone of "good society" should fall in line with him. This is a typical small-town, middle class, mentality.

The Frog swims away, but nevertheless the Rocket offers his own retort, describing how "irritating" it is when one person talks only about themselves while another person wants to talk about themselves even more. He goes on to speak again of his own virtue and "sympathetic nature," describing how lucky the Frog is to be in the presence of the Rocket, a figure of high society who was recently at the royal wedding.

The Rocket continues talking after the Frog has already departed, pointing to the fact that any speaking the Rocket does is exclusively for his own benefit, whether he realizes it or not. He also wrongly assumes that anyone in the countryside cares that he is a figure of the Court.

A Dragonfly sitting on a nearby bush reminds the Rocket that there is no reason to keep talking to the Frog since he is not even there anymore. When the Rocket tells the Dragonfly that he does not care if the Frog will not listen for he enjoys hearing himself talk, the Dragonfly quips that he should be a philosopher and flies away.

Wilde again mocks himself and his own societal class. As an advocate of aestheticism, Wilde was himself known for being something of a philosopher and was often invited to social occasions to provide interesting conversation. It seems that at least some part of him saw this as largely frivolous.

Once more, the Rocket keeps talking, alone and sinking into the mud, reflecting on what a loss it is for the Dragonfly not to bask in such "[g]enius" as the Rocket clearly possesses. The Rocket reassures himself that he will be properly recognized someday.

That the Rocket continues speaking just the same whether there is another character present or not again points to the fact that he does so for his own benefit.

A beautiful Duck swims up and immediately points out the Rocket's strange shape, asking if he was born that way or it has resulted from some sort of accident. The Rocket attempts to belittle the Duck, stating that she must be a poor person of **the countryside** if she does not recognize someone as noble, sophisticated, and famous as he. He tells her that she will be impressed to hear that he can fly up in the air and explode "in a shower of golden rain."

Wilde again alludes to the subjective nature of beauty and perception. The Rocket considers himself to be magnificent, but the Duck sees him as malformed. The Duck herself is thought to be quite beautiful, though in physical appearance she could not be more different from the Rocket. He is tall thin, and soars into the air. She is short, round, and waddles across the ground or swims in the pond.

The Duck is unimpressed by this, and tells the Rocket so. She cannot see what function he offers, since he cannot plough or pull or care for sheep. The Rocket declares that the Duck is obviously of a lower order, since people of the Rocket's high station do not work. They gloat in their achievements and that is all. He furthers reports that he regards hard work merely as the pastime of those who have nothing else to do.

Contrary to the Frog, the Duck is not very similar to the Rocket. She is simple and believes in functionally contributing to society. The Rocket is fancy and pompous, believing that work is beneath him and that he needs no function since he contributes to the world by simply existing.

The Duck is of a kind disposition and neglects to continue the argument. Instead, she tells the Rocket that she hopes he will live in the swamp. The Rocket rudely declines, however, since the swamp is "essentially suburban" and lacks the sophistication he is accustomed to. He surmises that he will return to **Court**, since he is destined to cause a great impression among society.

Once again, the Duck subverts the character of the Rocket, offering kindness in the face of his argumentative nature. She even offers him the chance to belong somewhere, even though he is constantly pushing away from the people around him. Instead, he chooses to continue his relentless pursuit of fame.

This causes the Duck to reminisce about her own brief stint in public life and politics. A while back, seeing many things in need of reform, she had chaired a meeting in which they condemned all the things they did not agree with. But, when realizing that nothing was changing and it made little difference, the Duck decided to take up a domestic life instead and care for her family.

It would seem that the Duck's kindness, simplicity, and practicality could not co-exist with the politics and posturing of public life. As the kindest and most well-adjusted character, the Duck's exit from public life offers a clear value statement: public life is for conceited people, while domestic life is for good people.

The Rocket is unaffected by this, stating that he is born for public life and accustomed to the finer things that high society can offer. With this, the Duck remembers that she is hungry and swims away, to the great distress of the Rocket since he still has so many things to say.

The Rocket's nearsightedness prevails once again. He is unable to see that the Duck is happier, kinder, and more virtuous than anyone he has met so far. He is set in his ways, unyielding. The Duck, too practical to fight a losing battle, gives up.

As the Rocket is "think[ing] about the loneliness of genius" and sinking further into the mud, two boys come near carrying carrying bundles of sticks and a kettle. The Rocket sees them and once again believes them to be a "deputation" sent to honor him somehow.

The "loneliness of genius" is in fact the loneliness of extreme vanity, but this fact requires far more self-awareness than the Rocket possesses. Once again, even in the swamp, approached by two kids, the Rocket feeds his ego and assumes they are somehow going to praise him.

One of the boys notices the Rocket and picks him out of the mud, calling him an "old stick." Once again, the Rocket is convinced that the boy must have said "gold stick" which seems to be a high praise.

The Rocket's constant reinterpretation of reality points to the way in which one's preconceived notions about the world and other people can wildly distort the way they perceive what is around them.

The boys decide to burn the Rocket with the other sticks so that they can boil their water, so they build a small fire and set the Rocket in it. The Rocket is exuberant, believing that they are purposefully setting him off in "broad daylight" so that the whole country will be able to see him.

The boys are finally offering the smallest amount of utility to the Rocket, some semblance of purpose, but of course he does not see this. The unspoken irony is that a firework is far more visible less visible during the daytime than at night, but the Rocket's perception of it fits into his delusion.

The boys fall asleep. Because of how damp the Rocket is, it takes a long while for him to dry out enough for his gunpowder to ignite, but eventually it does. The Rocket soars into the air, shouting about how high he will fly and how his explosion will be so deafening that it is all that is talked about for an entire year.

The Rocket, due to his own vanity and sensitivity, has fallen far from what could have been. Rather than shooting off in front of the Court and being seen by many, he goes off in the countryside, alone and anonymous. Even so, he believes he will be famous.

The Rocket explodes, but nobody hears him. Even the two boys remain sound asleep. The Rocket is reduced to a stick, which falls on the back of a Goose, startling her. As the Rocket's embers fade, he states that he always knew he would be "a great sensation." Then, he goes out.

The Rocket dies without a legacy. His pursuit of fame, his vanity, and his delusion have cost him the single thing that mattered to him: being widely seen and admired. Instead, he dies in obscurity, holding onto his delusion until his last breath.

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